

CHEAP TRUTH

EDITORIAL. SF notions dominate the current Geneva arms talks. In this issue, CHEAP TRUTH responds to the zeitgeist.

POP AGITPROP

Since its unlikely birth, SF has been a trash medium, its appeal restricted to a subcultural faithful. But that appeal is widening and is being culturally legitimized. With the advent of the Strategic Defense Initiative, the elements, themes, and modes of thought

native to science fiction have become central to worldwide political debate.

One SF splinter group has shown a laudable quickness in grasping SF's new political potential. Unlike traditional SF "movements" this group of writers is not marked by literary innovation but by its radical ideology. For purposes of discussion we will refer to them as the "Pournelle Disciples."

This group has a number of strengths. The first is their solid publishing base in Tor and Baen Books. A second is their claim to tradition, especially the gung-ho technolatry that has marked genre SF since the days of Gernsback. Another crucial advantage is their ideological solidarity, which gives them the sort of shock-troop discipline that Lenin installed in the Bolsheviks. In this case, their Lenin is the redoubtable ex-Marxist Jerry Pournelle, who wears multiple hats as writer, editor, theorist, and political organizer.

Pournelle's importance to this movement is demonstrated by a reading of his recent editorial effort, *FAR FRONTIERS* Volume III, (Fall 1985), published by Baen Books. The surprisingly dull stories in this book pale miserably in comparison to Pournelle's numerous bursts of naked political agitprop. These are in every way more intellectually challenging and emotionally disturbing than the fiction.

The gem of this collection is Vernor Vinge's "The Ungoverned," a sequel to his commercially successful novel *THE PEACE WAR*. In this ideologically correct effort, radical Libertarians defend their realm from an authoritarian army. Thanks to their innate cultural superiority and a series of fraudulent plot Maguffins, they send the baddies packing with a minimum of personal suffering and a maximum of enemy dead.

This piece is worth closer study for its standard Disciple elements. First, and very characteristically, it is post-apocalyptic, conveniently destroying modern society so that a lunatic-fringe ideology can be installed as if by magic. Convenient bits

and pieces of high-tech are paraded in a flurry of buzzwords. Vinge avoids extrapolating their effects on society, because society is in shambles.

Pournelle's promotion of the moral obligation to keep and bear arms is well known. Vinge carries this libertarian love of personal armament to amazing lengths. In his scenario, private citizens own, not merely automatic rifles, but chemical weapons and neutron warheads, thus carrying the libertarian argument to a kind of logical reductio ad nauseum.



The other stories are much worse. David Drake, a Disciple stalwart who specializes in military tales of a purported "gut-wrenching hyperrealism," contributes a silly and utterly negligible short-short about dimensional gates opening in a suburban kitchen. Despite its merciful brevity, it is still unable to make any coherent point. Rivka Jacobs' interminable "Morning On Venus" spoils a vaguely interesting opening with pompous meandering. By making the hero an historian, Jacobs avoids the painful necessity of extrapolating a coherent future, indulging instead in a confusing mishmash of historical sermonizing. Alexander Jablokov contributes a flabby fantasy pastiche, which imitates Niven as slavishly as one can without understanding him. All three of these stories feature much gratuitous offscreen sex, assuring the readership of the authors' with-it frankness without the sticky necessity of actually talking about fucking.

John Dalmas contributes a decent male-adventure Western. Unfortunately this story pretends to be SF. It is set on yet another colonial planet lapsed into barbarism, a fictional convention that allows SF writers to espouse reactionary social values without a blush of shame.

Dean Ing's recent novel for Tor, *WILD COUNTRY*, takes a similar tack. This book, the last in a post-apocalypse trilogy, is a meandering series of shoot-'em-ups. Its hero is an assassin. The villain is a gay heroin-smuggler, as if an America devastated by nukes did not have enough problems. Ing's hasty depiction of future society is grossly inconsistent; ravaged and desperate when the plot requires desperadoes, yet rigidly organized when Ing suddenly remembers the existence of computers.

The book is a Western, set in a West Texas conveniently returned to the robust frontier values of Judge Roy Bean. Men hold their land, with lasers if possible, while women raise corn and keep the home fires burning. Ing struggles valiantly with Texan dialect: "'Late, schmate,' growled the aging veterinarian, whose rough cattleman's lingo masked an excellent education."

The book is speckled with maps, diagrams, and lectures on the Second Amendment, which, one learns, "absolutely and positively, guarantees citizens their right to keep and bear arms."

Like his fellows, Ing treasures this amendment, the last remnant of the American polity that he is willing to respect. There isn't much mention of, say, voting, or separation of powers. Power resides in the barrel of a gun, preferably the largest and shiniest possible.

Janet and Chris Morris, who wrote *THE 40-MINUTE WAR* for Baen, are down on terrorists. The politics of this book are dominated by adulation of the state of Israel, where every sabra carries a righteous submachinegun. The heroes are counterterrorist CIA assassins, whose purported fluent grasp of Arabic only fuels a xenophobic hatred of Moslem culture. They tactfully refer to their murderous work as "greasing rag-heads."

The female protag is a hard-as-nails liberated journalist: "Shit, the world is ending, and you're Ms.-ing me? I'm a Miss, not a Ms., whatever that is."

The prose is often clumsy, dominated by run-on sentences and misplaced clauses: "To most Foreign Service officers, even in the Mediterranean, word came earlier than it did to Marc Beck, who was babysitting a convention of genetic engineers with astronomical security clearances being held at a private estate on the Red Sea when an aide slipped him a note." This was not an oversight; it's the book's third sentence.

Janet Morris is not a gifted prose stylist, but she means business. The most potent political treatise of the Disciples is a work of nonfiction by Morris, David Drake, and Congressman Newt Gingrich, the ultrarightist Golden Boy of the born-again contingent. This book, *WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY*, presents the straight gospel of Pournelle's private pressure group, the Citizen's Advisory Council on National Space Policy. It advocates "an effective American monopoly of space," in which laissez-faire capitalists fill orbits with "the Hiltons and Marriotts of the solar system." These space cities will be manned by Christian space-settlers, whose stern faith gives them the backbone for the frontier life. "The rise of high-tech preachers on cable television is accelerating the re-emergence of religion as a legitimate vehicle for explaining the world. Presently there will be religious software for home computers and a host of modern high-tech efforts to spread a new, electronic gospel...."

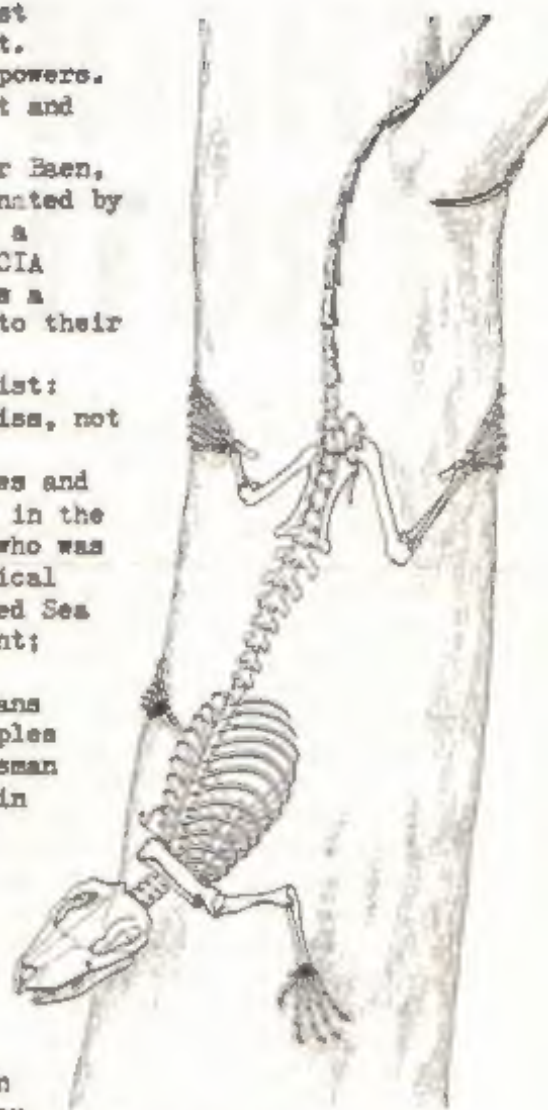
With this treatise the gloves are off, and the Disciples come full-circle. This combination of 19th-century values and visionary technolatrny is a potent one which, though easy to mock, is easier to underestimate.

SP has power now, and it is our responsibility to see to what uses that power is put. Pournelle, as usual, has put it best, in his argument for the Strategic Defense Initiative. Peace, Prosperity, and Freedom are his watchwords. Peace: as an orbiting Pax Americana over a world requiring American tutelage. Prosperity: for high-tech asteroid-barons, who will watch the disastrous crumbling of communist society from the safety of orbit. Freedom -- from any necessity of change or accommodation to other cultures.

Naive space enthusiasts believe that humanity will climb into the cosmos on a Pentagon payroll. Many dislike the idea, but feel that an allegiance with the military is a small price to pay for a life of bliss in an orbiting O'Neill colony. The psychological appeal these colonies hold for us in SP is not hard to grasp. An O'Neill colony will be an airtight little world, of technically educated white Americans gazing raptly at the stars. A world soaring far above the heads of threatening mundanes. A world that is fandom's objective correlative.

SP has always been publicly identified with space flight. There is no shame in that. But if SBI's backers become the predominant political spokesmen for SP, we will be associated from now on with X-ray lasers. Whether we like it or not.

In the final analysis, it does not matter that they write badly or that their ideas are lunatic. That has never stopped any of us.



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"Think globally, act locally"

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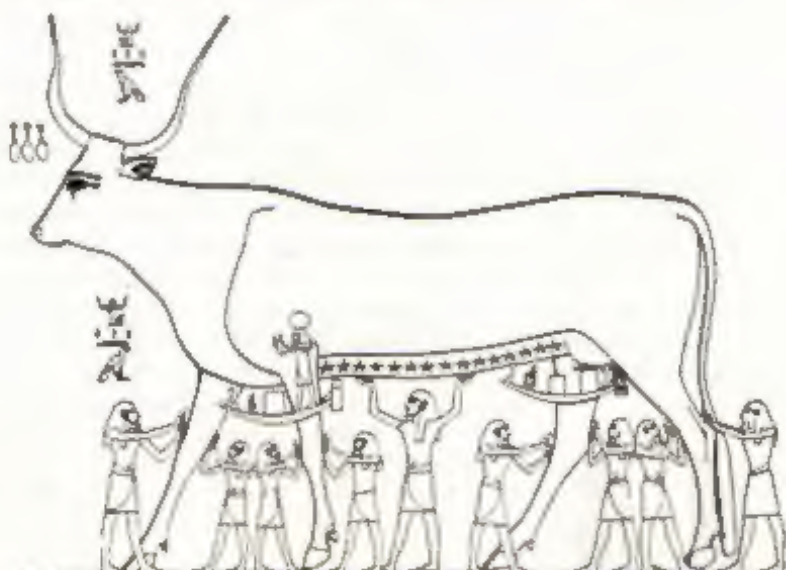


Fig. 40. The Divine Cow